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The Arrival of the Zombie Apocalypse

When a society is sick, growing numbers of people can only find the sense of meaning and belonging they need in a group, or movement, that claims to have all the answers for their problems.

By Kathleen Hayes

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Of all the terrifying scenes last week — the hordes attacking the Nova music festival exhibit in New York; the jihad-enthusing demonstrators in Washington, D.C. chanting "Hezbollah, Hezbollah, kill another Zionist now"; the balaclava-clad figures in the subway car daring riders to "Raise your hand if you're a Zionist!" — it's the bizarre, repetitive incantation that really haunts me. It's the video of a woman at the center of a group of keffiyeh-clad figures, Palestinian and yellow Hezbollah flags waving in the background. The woman shouts a phrase over a bullhorn and the crowd repeats it back to her, a mass of mindless Manchurian Candidates. The video begins with the declarative sentence "F— the Nova music festival," which is duly repeated back.

"AKA the place!" the woman shouts.
"AKA the place!" the crowd intones.
"Where Zionists decided to rave!" she shouts.
"Where Zionists decided to rave!" it repeats.
At risk of benumbing the reader, a sense of the scene requires a bit more. The woman and group continue:
"Next to a concentration camp."
"Next to a concentration camp."
"That's exactly what this music festival was."
"That's exactly what this music festival was."
"It's like having a rave.""
"It's like having a rave."
"Right next to the gas chambers."
"Right next to the gas chambers."
"During the Holocaust."
"During the Holocaust."

It is, one commenter on X writes, the zombie apocalypse. I think it is about the eeriest thing I have ever seen. But it has also made me think about the past.

I was active on the far left for over 25 years. I attended countless demonstrations during that time, including many against Israel. No demonstration ever happened without chanting — meaning calling out repetitive, sing-song-y slogans in a group — and I eagerly took part. Not participating would have been seen as a sign that my heart

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fellow righteous people felt good. It bound me to them, creating a sense of unity and camaraderie that warmed an indifferent world.

Because I belonged to a particularly sectarian, orthodox Trotskyist group, I only joined chants written and approved by my party. These chants were notoriously arhythmic and tortured as prose, but they were, we told ourselves, programmatically correct, which was much more important than trivialities such as whether they rhymed. So I marched with my comrades in what we called "military formation," feet slapping on the pavement, sunshine on my face, chanting some convoluted slogan about U.S. imperialism being the world's greatest terrorist. The voices of my dear, intelligent comrades merged with mine. A breeze stirred, birds sang overhead, our spirits were as one with our heroes and martyrs. It was hypnotizing.

Whenever I left my party contingent to try selling our newspaper to people in the broader demonstration, I'd hear other chants: the ever-popular "In our thousands, in our millions, we are all Palestinians" or the perennial "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free." I thought the first chant was simply stupid, while I didn't think about the second one at all. If I had, it's possible that even in those days I would have recognized there was a problem with it: my party had a position — in theory — that it was quite wrong to call for driving the Jews into the sea. But I didn't think about it. I didn't join these chants because they weren't party chants, but I still soaked up the transcendent sense of solidarity. I smiled and basked in the sunshine and feeling of unity, my mind entirely blank.

So I know firsthand how chanting contributes to groupthink — how by repeating a phrase in tandem with others, a person's critical thinking faculties shut down for the sake of an emotional rush. And yet it seems to me that the bizarre scene of that group dully intoning after their leader, and similar videos I've seen since Oct. 7: this is something different. In all my years on the far left, I never saw this. The chanting of the old days was sometimes disturbing enough, but this? This looks like a new group psychosis.

That's how it appears to me now anyway, watching as an incredulous Zionist, but I know from experience that those incanting automatons must have powerful feelings for that woman with the bullhorn: respect, even adoration, faith. They must know on some level that what they are doing is weird; some might even have a niggling sense of how maniacally antisemitic it is. But they've learned to suppress those thoughts. Membership in the group requires participating in its rituals, as faithful and fervent followers, toward horrors unknown.

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doing is weird; some might even have a niggling sense of how maniacally antisemitic it is. But they've learned to suppress those thoughts. Membership in the group requires participating in its rituals, as faithful and fervent followers, toward horrors unknown.

It's a chillingly familiar story, recycled for the 21st century. It takes elements from the Soviet Union, Land of the Glorious October Revolution, and a measure from the Nuremberg rallies. There's mass hysteria à la the Salem Witch Trials, an echo of Jonestown, and a great animating spirit from Mao's Cultural Revolution. For more au courant material, there's the Taliban, Islamic State, and of course Hamas and Hezbollah. Put it all together and you have a movement devoted to oppression and terror, cloaked in the language of freedom and justice.

"I felt ashamed that I was less full of hate than the others," a sensitive Chinese boy remembered about participating in his country's Communist-organized campaigns more than sixty years ago. (His story is told in a Cold War classic, "Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism" by Robert Jay Lifton.) The designated enemy changes according to time and place—though curiously, it often seems to be the Jews. And hate never goes out of fashion.

When a society is sick, growing numbers of people can only find the sense of meaning and belonging they need in a group, or movement, that claims to have all the answers for their problems. Empty-eyed dogmatists reveal the truths that must be followed; exact punishment against renegades and those who fail to show enough zeal; and instruct their acolytes on who is the source of evil. In return they offer what may feel like the only protection against the abyss.

It sometimes looks hopeless, but successes are possible; light and reason may reach even the most unlikely of zealots. So fight on we must. One zombie at a time.

Kathleen Hayes *is the author of "Antisemitism and the Left: A Memoir."*

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